

EUROPA GHOST STORY

DARK CURTAIN SAGA

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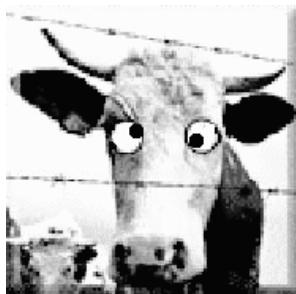
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EUROPA GHOST STORY

Twenty-Nine Years Earlier

HSwMS Larv

There is no life in space. There is only death. Space embraces death and cuddles it like a lover.

It was no different for the crew of the Swedish long-hauler, HSwMS *Larv*. Death was universal, waiting patiently outside their craft to squeeze them tightly and force the air from their lungs.

Commander Melker Haglund feared the vacuum of space, but he tried not to show that to his crew. He went about his duties every day as if nothing was wrong, but his fears were growing worse as they neared the end of the long voyage to Europa. It was a form of claustrophobia, with the large ship seeming smaller and smaller against the black void of space, pressing in more and more as they got further from the warmth of the sun. He kept his fears to himself, though, not even sharing them over SpaceNet with his wife, Freyja, back in Stockholm. But this would be his last voyage. Once he returned to Earth, he would never accept another mission to leave his home

planet, no matter how much money they offered. His lungs would never have to breathe the stale, canned air of a space ship ever again.

But there was no more time to think about that because Europa loomed large on the view screen.

"I double-checked the drilling platform from the stern, Commander," said Sandra Lindblom. "It's looking great. Once we begin our de-orbit burn, landing the drilling platform should be like putting a sleeping baby back in its *spjälsäng*."

Melker smiled and said nothing. Many people became chattering mouths during stressful moments, but he wasn't one of them. He liked to remain focused and quiet. He needed to concentrate now and let nothing distract him as the *Larv* descended to the icy surface.

"These moons of Jupiter have become the hottest real estate in the solar system," drawled Whip Noel from his seat behind them in the cockpit. He was a big Texan, the project's main engineer. The Swedish government was paying the American a fortune to come along on this mission. After all, Texas had a long history of deep drilling. But on Earth, it had traditionally been for fossil fuels. On Mars and various asteroids, it had been for precious metals. But on Europa, it would be for water, just water. Out here, that was the most valuable commodity of all.

"Y'all's government will have to go all the way to Saturn to get any peace and quiet after we get this thing hummin'," Whip continued. "Europa's gonna be like Houston at rush hour. Every ship out past Mars is gonna wanna come here."

Melker gritted his teeth and tried to ignore the big man. The brash Texan never shut up, and probably even talked in his sleep. Luckily, they'd given him his own cabin.

Whip continued his monologue. "I think I'll find a few hundred acres and homestead a place of my own out here. I've always wanted to raise a few thousand head of cattle. It's not like they wouldn't have plenty of space to roam. Get it? 'Space to roam?'"

Sandra smiled at the pun. "Good luck with that on Europa. There's no atmosphere down there. And no grass for them to eat."

"You're forgetting I'm an engineer," replied Whip. "And a damn good one. I'll design special space helmets for the cows so they can still chew their cuds. And as to the grass, we've got some hardy varieties in Texas that can grow anywhere."

This time Sandra laughed out loud. Melker could tell she'd developed a crush on Whip since he'd boarded from the asteroid station at Ceres. She liked to flirt with him and always laughed at his bad jokes.

The Swedish government had risked a lot on this mission. They'd purchased the big drilling platform from the US and flew it all the way out here attached to the *Larv*, a very expensive proposition. Nothing like this had ever been attempted. But, if successful, the platform would create the foundation for a brand new station on Europa. And they'd made it all this way without a serious problem. But now came the final, scariest part. Melker knew he still had to get it safely down onto the surface of Jupiter's moon.

"This ain't my first rodeo, you know," said Whip, as the thrusters fired for the ship's first burn. "I was there when they discovered Bryantonium on that asteroid five years ago. So this ain't no big deal for me." He glanced over to Melker. "How long 'til we touch down, Commander?"

Melker glanced at his screen. "At this rate of descent, twenty-two minutes."

Sandra spoke up. "Commander, do you mind if I kill the cockpit lights so I can share your visual vectors?"

"Please do," answered Melker. He had learned to trust this woman on the long voyage. It was good to have a skilled copilot next to him at times like this.

Sandra made a few taps on her console and the cockpit darkened. The only light came from the view screen and a pale, white glow from the surface of Europa outside the plastisteel window.

"Ohhhh...this is spooky," said Whip. He wouldn't have any duties until after landing. And then he would be the first to step outside and check on the platform after its long voyage.

Melter took his ship off autopilot. He used both hands to grasp

the controls. This was the part of his job he enjoyed most. He was in control. His claustrophobic demons couldn't fight him now. The air tasted fresh and his heart pumped blood through his veins. For the next twenty minutes, he would be alive. He would become one with the *Larv*.

Behind him, Whip spoke. Of course he did. The man never shut up.

"This reminds me of a story I once heard," he said in a tone of voice that sounded like they were sitting around a campfire. "You ever hear the story of Oceanus Clements?"

"Tell us," answered Sandra with a chuckle in her voice. "The vector is clear all the way to the surface. We've got time, don't we, Commander? I love a good story."

Melker simply grunted.

"Well, okay then," said Whip. "Oceanus Clements was the assistant engineer on an old FT-500 freighter named SS *Jack Williamson*. This was long ago, on the old Mars route back when it was new. In those days, it was a two-year journey each way, and there wasn't much space traffic. So they were surprised when they picked up a distress signal. But the distress signal wasn't coming from a ship. It was coming from a lifeboat."

"A lifeboat?" asked Melker, not looking away from his console. In spite of himself, he'd been listening in. "What was a lifeboat doing way out there? There was hardly any traffic to Mars in those days."

"Exactly," answered Whip with satisfaction. "That's what made it so mysterious. That lifeboat must have been drifting around out there forever. They chased it down and hauled it onto their ship, sure they'd find a decomposing body or two inside. But when they equalized the pressure and stepped into the docking port, they heard something from inside the lifeboat, a muffled pounding, as if someone was alive in there and desperate to get out."

"No!" exclaimed Sandra. She was looking away from her controls. "What happened next?"

"Well, that's where good old Oceanus Clements comes in. He was

the one standing closest to the lifeboat hatch. He ran forward and tried the hatch but it was jammed. In the meantime, the frantic pounding continued, like someone was running out of air in that old tin can. Oceanus knew he had to be quick. He tried to pry the hatch open, grabbing for any tool he could find. It was only when he found an old crowbar from storage that he was able to wrench the hatch free. And by then, the pounding had stopped. Gritting his teeth, old Oceanus stepped into the lifeboat. Well...guess what he found in there?"

There was a long pause. Whip sat back in his chair as if the story was over. But of course it wasn't. He just knew when to pause.

"What did he *find*?" asked Sandra in exasperation.

"Well, Ma'am," answered Whip. "He found nothing. Nothing at all. The damned lifeboat was empty as a can o' beans when chow is over."

There was another pause. Melker broke the silence. "Fifteen minutes to touchdown. Everything A-Okay so far. Thanks for the story. I guess."

"Oh, but that's not the end," said Whip.

"Well, you'd better hurry," muttered Melker as he continued to guide the *Larv* down. There was very little turbulence on a small moon like this.

Whip continued his story. "The next few days, the rest of the Williamson's crew noticed that Clements was acting strangely. He withdrew from everybody else, and wandered around in the bowels of the ship talking to himself. He'd never been that way before. They guessed that the mysterious pounding from inside the empty lifeboat had unhinged him or something."

"Poor man," said Sandra turning in her chair. "I feel for him."

"So did the crew. But then one night, the ship's engines simply shut down. Everyone scrambled around trying to figure what had happened. And that's when Oceanus Clements launched himself out the airlock in the old lifeboat."

"And they couldn't go after him because their engines were damaged?" asked Sandra.

"Exactly," said Whip. "There was nothing they could do. They couldn't save Clements. Evidently, he was the one who'd disabled their engines. By the time they got them going again, there was no sign of the lifeboat, no distress call, nothing. No one ever saw Oceanus again."

The ship was quiet, with only the whine of the landing engines easing them down to the surface of Europa.

"So now, whenever there's a distress call from the deepest reaches of space, they say it's Oceanus Clements, looking to find his way back home. And if anyone picks him up, they'll meet up with the thing that drove him crazy in the first place. And no one wants to think about *that*. Or about what made that pounding noise from inside that old, abandoned lifeboat."

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Sandra screamed. Even Melter jumped in his seat and whirled around.

Then they saw the large wrench in Whip's hand, the one he'd just used to clang on the side of his metal chair.

Whip started to laugh.

Sandra let out a long breath. "You're a horrible, horrible man, you know that? You scared the *skit* out of me."

Even Melter laughed. He had to admit that Whip's story had been good for him, diffusing the tension of the descent.

Whip smiled. "Time for me to quit goofing around. Your government doesn't pay me to tell ghost stories, do they? This frontier town needs a sheriff. Let's not disappoint the good citizens of Europa."

"We're the only ship scheduled. There's no one else here," said Sandra.

"A lawman still needs to be on duty. We don't want this one horse town to turn lawless, do we?"

Melter grunted one more time. Yes, the man's story had been

entertaining, but he didn't understand the American's sense of humor. He hoped he never would.

Within minutes, the *Larv* gently touched down onto the ice of Europa. They had made it to one of Jupiter's moons, over 300 million miles from Earth.

Whip got to his feet and stretched. He walked over to the plastic-steel window of the ship. It was daytime here, and he gazed out at the endless ridges of white and blue ice, glittering softly in the weak light of the distant sun. Years from now, this very spot would be jumping, filled with drills and platforms, pulling water from miles below the ice, more water than existed on planet Earth. Spaceships would come here for that water, stopping by on their way home from the outer planets and asteroids. They'd have to. Humans needed water to survive. And it would all start when he stepped out of the *Larv* to begin work on the very first drilling platform.

Ten minutes later, Whip was suited up in the airlock. He looked down at the Colt '45 on his hip.

"What's that for?" asked Melker through the com in the other room. "There's no atmosphere out there. A gun won't fire."

Whip smiled. "This belonged to one of my ancestors. He was a real Texas Ranger."

"What are you planning to shoot, a polar bear?"

Whip chuckled. "Nope. But there might be some bad hombres out there. And I *am* the sheriff after all..."

A VOICE SPOKE. It was not human.

"They have landed. And they are carrying a drilling platform." There was a soft squishing sound as the speaker's large eyes rolled around in beds of mucous.

"You should probably engage the Curtain now," said another voice. This voice was human. Or, it had been human once.

"Now? Do you think there is danger already? They only just arrived."

"You don't know humans, do you? Europa is a critical spot. Once they establish a base there and get it up and running, thousands of ships will be able to resupply and refuel near Jupiter. It will inspire them and allow them to make it past their own solar system."

"How long do you think that will take?"

"Twenty years, maybe thirty. In Quantum Time, that's hardly a blink."

"True. We will engage the Curtain now. That should keep them away for hundreds of years. In the meantime, we will send you back to keep an eye on them for us."

"I am happy to serve," said Oceanus Clements in a flat, dead voice.

Thank you for reading Europa Ghost Story.

The story is continued in the next book of the Dark

Curtain Saga...

Europa Nightmare.

EUROPA NIGHTMARE



EUROPA NIGHTMARE CHAPTER ONE

HSwMS Skalbagge

Everything went dark on the *SS John W. Campbell Jr.*

Erik Juergenson cursed in two languages. This wasn't the first time the supply ship had lost power. Not even the first time today. He didn't dare take his hands off the controls of his ship, *Skalbagge*. His docking computer would have to recalculate the coordinates if it came back online. He hated to fly blind. Well, only half blind.

Flipping a switch, his smaller craft could go to manual control and he could maneuver out of the path of the much bigger ship. At least he hoped so. Right now it was a monstrous, slate black hulk against a background of glittering stars. They had been only four minutes from docking when the power had blinked out.

Europa Station had called in Juergenson two days ago. The *Campbell* had been racing towards Jupiter, flying erratically one minute and on a perfect trajectory the next. The crew had responded when hailed but their voices had sounded wooden, made no sense. The ship had failed all the normal protocols and procedures on its approach to the planet. As they had gotten close, they didn't correct

course. They didn't use Jupiter's gravity to slow their ship down. One hour ago, they pulled away from the planet at an oblique angle. Evidently, that maneuver had used up all their fuel and they were now floating free with no power.

Juergenson let out a deep sigh, and the canned air of the bridge tasted metallic on his tongue. He'd have to perform the docking maneuver all by himself. He needed to get onboard and figure out what in the name of Odin was going on with these people.

He pushed a lever forward. The *Skalbagge* responded as it always did, moving towards the other ship ever so slightly. His ship did what it was told. He'd seen to that every waking hour since he'd left Earth five years ago. The *Skalbagge* was his environment, his safety net, his world. It had grown to seem like a part of his body. Now he pushed a button which would override the *Campbell's* offline docking mechanism. He'd have to eyeball this one and do it the old-fashioned way.

"There we go," he said, staring through the view screen, talking as if to a lover. "Come to me. I want to hold you in my arms."

"Three minutes," said the ship's computer. It had learned to ignore Juergenson's flights of fancy, what he called his 'pillow talk.'

"Inge! Where's your romance?" he said, looking around the bridge as if there were a woman actually standing there. He'd named the voice on the ship's computer Inge after his first girlfriend back in Borås.

"Don't run away from me. I want to feel your touch," he purred.

He pushed the lever another centimeter forward. He had done this dozens of times before. Every ship that approached the Swedish colony was greeted by the *Skalbagge*. The robotic supply ships from Earth didn't need his help. But the *Campbell* had a crew. It had left Earth six years ago on a journey to the outer colonies at Saturn. Now it was on its way home. Or, at least, it had been trying.

"Two minutes."

Juergenson slowed his ship to match the other. He needed to get just a few meters closer so he could dock. He had time enough to send one more automated message, hoping they would respond. Even

with no power, they should still have been able to. Every ship had built in redundancies. But there was still nothing.

"One minute," said Inge's voice.

"Don't be shy, my little Ålskare," said Juergenson. "I'll be gentle. I've been waiting two days for you."

"Initiate docking procedures," said Inge. The *Skalbagge* was close enough now. Juergenson made one more, slight change. There was a gentle quake when the two ships finally embraced.

"Ahh, that wasn't so bad, was it, my little Flickvän?"

Juergenson looked at his computer screen. The docking seal was good. In a few minutes, he would be able to go and find out what had happened over there. Everything in his gut told him it was going to be bad. He double checked his space helmet to make sure it was secure and in place. He turned on the light in his faceplate because it would be dark over there.

Amundsen Station on Europa interrupted the quiet. "Juergenson, give us an update please."

He recognized the voice. It was Ljungman. The controller usually made him laugh but now he was strictly business. They were all watching his mission with great interest.

"We have a good seal, and I'm waiting for a pressure match."

"Be safe, my friend," said Ljungman.

Juergenson never had time to reply. His own ship went black. Even the power in his faceplate switched off. He tried to turn it on again but nothing happened. His ship was dark. His spacesuit was dark. He reached for a flashlight but it wouldn't turn on. He hit it but it still didn't work. And there's no dark like the dark of space when you're cooped up inside a ship with no power.

Juergenson was a veteran pilot. He stayed calm. He tried to contact Europa, but his com was dead. He heard a strange pop in his ears. It didn't sound like his ears popping from a change in the pressure of his suit. Then he heard a noise coming from the air lock. A scraping sound. He heard the door to the airlock begin to open. He stared that way as hard as he could, hoping to see something, but it

was just too dark. Suddenly, his flashlight switched on. The beam caught the opening door of the air lock. At first, Juergenson was confused by what he saw coming his way. Then he screamed. But that did him no good whatsoever.

Erik Juergenson's days of pillow talk were over.

EUROPA NIGHTMARE CHAPTER TWO

Senator Alan K Simpson

“**What's** the name of that ship again?”

“It's the *Star Ship John W Campbell Jr*, Sir. It's a long-hauler making the Saturn loop.”

Captain Matthew Martin had never heard of the *Campbell* before.

“She's adrift and has no power,” said Michaelson. “Sensors aren't reporting any life signs.”

Martin had always liked Michaelson. The young crewman was good at his job. And he needed a good crew today. He had known it ever since he got orders from Fleet to intercept the ship. Michaelson had recommended having missiles locked and ready as they approached. That wasn't standard protocol when an Earth vessel approached another Earth vessel. Maybe if the other ship had been from Mars or Luna. But here, near Jupiter, they were too far away from the open rebellion closer to Earth.

“Keep those missiles tucked away in their tubes. Let's not show

our teeth just yet. Remember, we're all one big happy family out here," said Captain Martin.

Martin looked over the shoulder of his navigator, Lieutenant Helen Constance, who was monitoring the data on her screen. He knew it was her first time past the asteroid belt. He had been out here many times before but he remembered his first time. She was probably nervous and excited, even though her icy demeanor never showed it.

It was good to be way out here again, away from the politics and chaos closer to Earth. Although the conflict with Mars and Luna was supposed to be over, there was still a lot going on. Earth had subdued the rebellions, allegedly bringing them back into the fold. It had only taken ten months and three dozen ships of Earth's Inner Fleet to get them to settle down. That and sending most of their leaders into exile on mining asteroids out past Saturn. Not a shot had been fired. But Martin knew it was only a matter of time before things flared up again.

Nine souls served on his ship, an ancient frigate named the *Simpson*, after a long dead Senator from Wyoming. Although the *Simpson* was a relic itself. The crew only called it the *Simpson* when they were filling out reports, but onboard, the crew affectionately called their ship the *Homer*, after a character in an even more ancient cartoon show that had been making a comeback lately on SpaceNet.

Even though his ship was a privateer, Martin had secured a Letter of Marque from Earth so they could do what needed to be done out here. It gave him all the leeway he needed to hunt and capture any Martian or Lunar ship that caused him a problem. While Earth kept her fleet close to home in order to protect the planet, ships like his protected their interests further out.

Lt. Constance was second in command. Martin had picked her out of all of the other candidates from her class. She had graduated from the Academy in the class of '74. Earth had just cut back on the Fleet's budget, in spite of the unrest from the inner planets. Martin wondered if there were any senators from Wyoming that had some-

thing to do with that. In any event, there were a lot of candidates to choose from for the XO job. The Fleet wasn't hiring, but many Earth privateers like his were. Martin only had to interview a few candidates to know she was the best. And so far, it seemed he had chosen well. She had been the one to lead the boarding party onto a loaded Martian merchantman near Venus a couple months ago while the rebellion was still going on. The captured ship had been turned over to the Earth Fleet Station on Ceres. The auction would take place next year, and there would be millions of credits once the ship was sold, inflating all their bank accounts.

And now they were closing in on another ship, a large, black hulk, floating in space against the stars. Maybe this would be another lucrative salvage job. At least Martin hoped so.

"Bring us alongside. Where did this ship come from again?" asked Martin.

Constance pulled up the *John W. Campbell's* flight plan. "They made the standard run to Saturn with stops at Titan and Rhea. They were heading back to Earth with a stop at Europa. Normal for a long hauler."

"Were they carrying anything unusual?"

"Nothing that's listed. Standard supplies for the colonies."

Martin looked through the view screen at the *Campbell*. "It's a mighty big ship. Looks kind of ominous dead in the water like that." He added, under his breath, "Sometimes Captains don't list everything in their cargo holds."

"Can we take her for our own?" asked Constance. "I mean, Sir, they're adrift. There's no power over there and no communication."

"We might be able to make a salvage claim. But that's a grim thing you're asking. Either they're all dead over there or they had to abandon ship. I'm thinking the worst because none of the hatches for the escape pods are open."

"I've checked...pods are all still aboard," said Constance, looking at her scans.

"Are you up for another boarding?" asked Martin.

"Sure," answered Constance, not showing a hint of hesitation.

"I'm sure you'll want to use the same five crewmen as last time."

"Sure," she said again. "You pick good people. People like me."

Martin glanced over. She wasn't smiling but merely checking her scans one more time. He liked that Constance was so sure of herself. But he was old enough to know that her confidence might get her into trouble. "There could be a ship full of dead bodies over there. Do you think you can handle that?"

"Yes. And I think my boarding party could handle it as well."

"Okay. We're getting ready to dock so we'll both know pretty soon."

Michaelson continued to pilot the ship closer to *Campbell*. When all of the displays were lined up on his screen, he said, "Ready to dock, Sir. Would you like me to complete the mooring?"

Martin said, "Proceed..."

The words had just come out of his mouth when Michaelson cut him off. 'Sir! Their power just came on. My sensors show their primary reactor coming online as well!"

"What? How can that be?"

"I'm showing the same thing," said Constance. "Also, their engines are starting to engage."

"Back us off. Now," said Martin to Michaelson. "Someone must be alive over there after all. How could they get their engines started that fast?"

Neither Michaelson nor Constance gave him an answer. It wasn't possible, was it? Whatever had happened, it was dangerous. Very dangerous. If the other ship fired up engines while they were only meters away...

Martin looked through the viewport and then down at his own sensors. "Reverse full! Get us out of here as quick as you can! Her reactor is heating up much too fast. It looks like she's getting ready to blow!"

Michaelson did as he was told and the *Simpson* began to back away

quickly. The *Campbell* shrank in the *Simpson's* view screen. But not fast enough. Martin knew that if the other ship exploded at this distance it would destroy his ship as well. "Give me everything you've got," he said.

"Yes, Sir," said Michaelson. "We're already at one hundred twenty percent...one hundred twenty-five...one hundred thirty..."

The *Simpson* was an ancient ship and Martin knew it couldn't take much more. He had a choice between the devil in front or the devil inside.

"How much longer before she explodes?" asked Martin.

She looked at her readings. "Thirty seconds."

"Distance?" asked Martin.

Michaelson said, "One hundred kilometers."

Were they still too close? How had all of this happened? Martin wasn't the kind of Captain who took chances with the lives of his crew.

The *Campbell* was now just a speck on the view screen.

"One and fifty kilometers."

"Ten seconds. Nine. Eight..."

Martin said, "More speed!"

"Five, four, three, two...one..."

The explosion filled the view screen and the bridge was bathed in piercing light. Martin raised his hands to his eyes to shield them. Or maybe it was to protect him from the explosion. The *Simpson* shook as if tossed across a dance floor by a bad partner. Loose objects flew around the bridge. Martin could smell hot electronics. He thought that at any moment the hull would breach, leading to annihilation for them all. But the hull didn't breach. Within a few moments, the *Simpson* stopped shaking and objects clattered to the deck. Everyone took deep breaths, and there were nervous giggles of relief all across the bridge.

The old battlewagon had held together. They had gotten far enough away from the *Campbell* and they were all still alive.

"Status?" asked Martin.

Constance scanned the data filling her monitor. "Our paint is burnt, but we're unharmed. No systems damaged."

"Nice job," said Martin to the crew. The smell of sweat hung heavy in the air.

"Slow to a dead stop," said Martin.

Martin scratched his unruly, red beard. What had happened? *Campbell* had shown no life signs and no power when they approached. Somehow the crew had fired up the reactor. Cold-started the engines. And destroyed their ship within minutes of being dead in the water. Martin didn't know what to think. Nothing made sense. "Where was the last contact made with the *Campbell*?"

"Europa, the Swedish tending station there. Two weeks ago..."

Constance paused mid-sentence and her mouth dropped open.

"What?" asked Martin.

"Sir put the view screen on full magnification," she said.

"Why?" asked Martin.

"I think you should see this, Sir."

Martin punched some buttons on his console and gaped. There on the view screen, floating in space like a smooth asteroid, seemingly intact, was the *Campbell*.

"That's impossible," muttered the captain. Because it was.

EUROPA NIGHTMARE CHAPTER THREE

Brahe Station

“**Holy** cow, why are they all so damned big on Ganymede?” muttered Oscar Gunn as he prepared to step into the ring. This wasn’t his first fight, not by a long shot. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be his last fight either. His opponent for this one was huge. Hell, everyone on this moon was big, even the women, the kids, and the dogs. Weight class? No such thing on Ganymede. Why couldn’t he fight jockeys, midgets...sorry, little people, or maybe even ballerinas? Oscar always knew he could knock out a ballerina. But such is life as a bare-knuckle fighter. Ballerinas, little people, or jockeys didn’t climb into the ring on Brahe Station.

Oscar was surprised there was even a fight ring at all. A true one with three ropes and a flexible canvas floor for good footing. It even had the right dimensions: six meters per side. On most stations, they used chalk to mark out the ring on cafeteria floors. Here on Brahe Station, they had a real gymnasium with bleachers, spectators, and a referee. The large inhabitants of Ganymede put a lot of effort into

staging fights. They liked to watch combatants batter each other for their entertainment.

Brahe Station was neat and orderly as far as space stations go, giving the impression of being a safe harbor. But Oscar knew that wasn't the case. Not at all. The nickname for the station was "The Hall of Nine Hostages" and it was the seat of the O'Neil clan. The O'Neils loved mining aluminum, fighting, and taking hostages. Oscar wasn't from a rich family, nor did he have an immediate family at all, so he hoped they wouldn't take him hostage after this fight. Why would they? The O'Neils would have to wait a long time before anyone in the solar system gave them a lunar dollar for Oscar Gunn.

Oscar held onto the rope and looked across the ring beyond his opponent. One of the O'Neil's endless line of hostages was sitting ringside. He had been pointed out to Oscar earlier in the day, a member of a wealthy asteroid-mining family. While there's a certain distinction to being taken hostage by the O'Neils, Oscar didn't envy him one bit.

He leaned his head back and whispered over the crowd to Sean O'Neil, the promoter. He was also a big man but he'd begun to shrink with age. For some reason, people aged faster on low gravity moons. Oscar thought it should be the other way around but then again, he didn't know much about physics. As an eighth grade dropout on Earth, he had learned everything he needed on the streets and in the ring. "What's my take on this fight again?" he asked.

"Twenty-five percent of the house," said Sean O'Neil. "Like we agreed to over the SpaceNet. It's the standard here."

"We agreed on forty," said Oscar. He was lying of course. But the fight promoter was lying too. There was no actual standard, and they hadn't talked about the percentage. It was what you could actually get. On his first fight back on Earth, the promoter in Winnipeg had only given him fifteen percent. He had simply accepted that one, assuming that everyone was just as honest as he was. But when the promoter handed him a pitiful hundred-dollar lunar note, he vowed

to always be careful to settle the percentage before the fight started. And the best time was right before he stepped into the ring because there would be no time for the promoter to think about it. Usually, he ran a one-man operation, acting as fighter, promoter, manager and cutman. But on Ganymede, you had to go through the O'Neils. So you had to play hardball.

"Twenty-five percent?" said Oscar, twisting his mouth into a frown. "That's ridiculous. I'm outa here." He picked up his fight bag and made motions like he was going to walk away. That would have been a disaster for the O'Neils. Not that Oscar would really do that, of course. He'd never get off Ganymede alive if he walked away. But negotiations were like a poker game and you had to be willing to bluff.

"I guess maybe it was thirty percent," said O'Neil quickly. He had the look of all the O'Neils, with shifty, rat-like eyes.

"Thirty percent to fight against a monster fighter like that?" sputtered Oscar. He pointed across the ring at his waiting opponent. "You gotta be kidding me. Do I look like I ever lived on the belt?"

O'Neil paused and looked Oscar up and down. "You're solid, I'll give you that. But I'm not sure you'll give my cousins their money's worth tonight. I tell you what. I might be willing to go forty percent but only if you let my boy knock you out. What do ya think?"

Oscar knew what that meant. 'Knockout' meant he'd end up close to dead. Or maybe even dead. If he let that hulking guy connect with even one punch it might be the last punch he ever took.

"I don't take dives," said Oscar. He glanced to the bleachers and saw most of the O'Neil clan. They were tapping their feet impatiently. He had the advantage right now. But he couldn't overplay his hand. He simply waited the promoter out.

"God above all of us," said Sean O'Neil in disgust. "I should take some of this mutton under my shirt and fight you myself. Forty percent! Ya jus' wanna fuckin' spit on me, don't ya?"

Oscar knew when to shut up. The negotiations were working,

although he knew the promoter could have dozens of O'Neil thugs here in seconds to take care of him. And before long he'd be pushed through an airlock. But then again, if that happened the fight would have to be called off. So once again, he said nothing.

"You're a greedy bastard, aren't ya?" asked O'Neil. But his voice carried with it a small bit of respect.

Oscar almost smiled at that. What was that old saying, something about how it takes a bastard to know a bastard? He decided it was time to finally say something.

"I'll give you a good show."

O'Neil shook his head and grimaced. "Not the show they really want. What they really want is to see my cousin rip your head off of your shoulders. Is that what you'll give them?"

"How 'bout I catch the morning shuttle and move on?" said Oscar, stepping back from the ring.

"How 'bout we take you hostage?" countered Sean O'Neil. "If you don't bring in any money, we'll make you a slave for our house. It's always nice to have a slave to clean the toilets."

Oscar cursed under his breath. O'Neil had been getting ready to cave.

All through the gymnasium, rowdy voices were getting rowdier. The impatience of the crowd was the only card he held right now. He had been risking a lot to play hardball with the O'Neils. They might have had pretensions of being a fine house, but when it came down to it, they would always be a pack of thugs under the pressurized dome.

The crowd continued to get louder. Catcalls began pouring out from the top bleachers. O'Neil looked around, taking in the whole scene. Finally, he turned back to Oscar and ran a hand through his thinning gray hair. "Okay," he sighed. "We're all here for a little bit a fun tonight. I'm not trying to be the bad guy. We like to be friendly to one another on Brahe."

Oscar swallowed hard and waited.

"Thirty-five percent. That's the best I can do. You gotta leave me a little meat on the mutton."

Oscar knew when to grab onto a lifeline. "Okay," he said, trying to sound reluctant, even though he knew he had won. "Thirty-five it is. But you'll have to throw in a corner man. I'm on my own."

The promoter nodded his head. He looked over into the crowd and whistled. A teenage O'Neil came out of the crowd and ran over to the two men. Oscar didn't like the look of the kid. He had the same rat eyes as all of the O'Neils, but he also looked eager to please. Oscar knew he could never trust him. He was an O'Neil after all, but he only needed to trust him for as long as it took to finish this fight.

"He'll do," muttered Oscar.

The promoter shook Oscar's hand and smiled with relief. He went over to join his clan in the bleachers. Would he still be smiling when the fight was over? Definitely not.

Oscar handed the boy his bag. "Don't let this out of your sight. Keep it right next to you at all times. Got it?"

The teenager nodded and smiled. He was definitely a smiler. A real people pleaser. Or maybe he was just an idiot and that's why the promoter had picked him for the job.

Oscar gave him a stern look. "You're in over your head. If you knew what was going to happen tonight, you wouldn't be here. You'd be far away."

The boy continued to smile. "I've seen plenty of fights and plenty of fighters. What makes you so special?"

"You've never seen me fight. I'm going to give them something that no one on Ganymede will ever forget."

The smile left the boy's face and Oscar chuckled to himself. He had gotten the boy's attention with that one. Maybe he wasn't such an idiot after all...



**The Story Continues in
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STORY CREATORS

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Wayne Faust has been a full-time music and comedy performer for over 40 years, playing in 40 states and overseas in England, Scotland, and Holland. His funny songs have been heard on the radio all over the world and on the Internet. While on the road, he writes science-fiction and has over 40 stories published in various places, including Norway, Australia, and South Africa. He's published two full length books, "Thirty Years Without A Real Job," a fast-moving and entertaining memoir of his life in show business, and "12 Parables," a collection of short stories. You can find more than you'll ever need to know about Wayne on his website at www.waynefaust.com.

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